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Thomas Sheldon Forgotten Resident of Westfield

by Charles A. Bockelman

This essay is a biographical sketch of a Westfield man, who, while contributing a great deal of time, energy, and interest to the prosperity of his community, remains an obscure figure in the history of Westfield. Partly because he was not a member of the blue-blooded Sacket, Shepard, or Taylor families of Westfield, who actively recorded family histories, and partly because records and other written sources of the early 1800's provide only sketchy and "bare-bones" information about individuals, few resources exist that provide an insight into the everyday affairs of Thomas Sheldon. Hence, much of his life must remain a mystery. However, from the written sources that do exist, one may construct a general picture of the man, his contributions to his community, and in a larger, less specific sense, his contribution to the growing country.

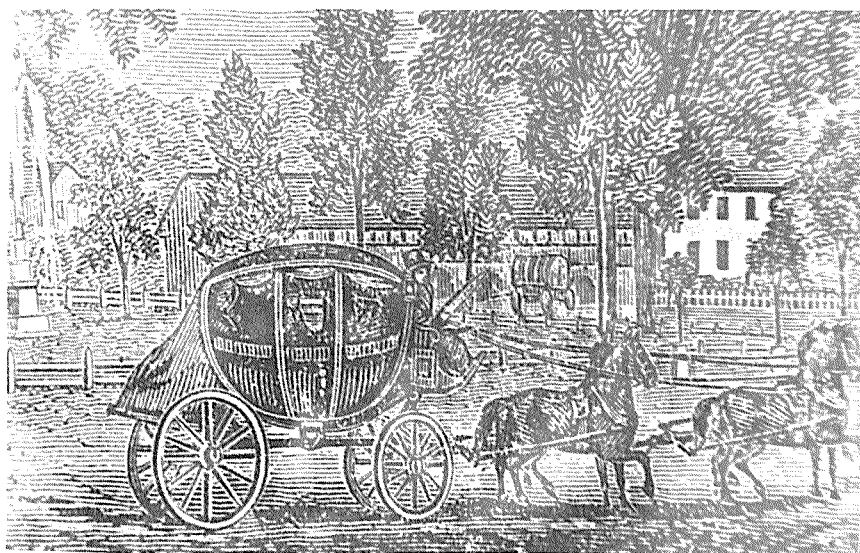
Thomas Sheldon was born in 1787, the first of six children of Colonel Thomas, and Abia Sheldon.¹ His place of birth and early life are unknown. However, his father was the superintendant of Newgate Prison until his death in 1802, and resided in Suffield, Connecticut.² Thomas Sheldon was only fourteen or fifteen when his father died, so it is probable that he lived in Suffield at the time.

The earliest record of Thomas Sheldon's residence in Westfield is in 1806, when he was assessed one dollar and one cent for the poll tax.³ Westfield became his home, and provided the opportunity for success for the enterprising young man. It is significant that he paid no tax on property for the years 1806 and 1807, but was taxed increasing amounts for the succeeding years.⁴ This fact could indicate that he was only a recent arrival in Westfield, starting out life on his own, but more likely reflects the unpropertied situation of young manhood.

Thomas Sheldon formed a company in 1811 with a John King of Hartford, but the exact nature of the company is unknown, no charter having been found.⁵ It seems from the records that exist that the purpose of the company was to buy and sell land for a profit. Undoubtedly, this was an active business venture, if one may judge by the number of deeds that passed through the hand of the company.⁶ But Sheldon did not rely upon this as his only means of support. A deed dated May 28, 1812, lists his occupation as a yeoman, and the U.S. Census of 1820 lists him as being employed in agriculture.⁷ He also rented land and made mortgage loans, although this was probably later in his life, when his financial situation was stable and broad-based.⁸

On December 31, 1812, Thomas Sheldon married Lucy Palmer of Westfield.⁹ Their first child, Eliza Palmer Sheldon, was born in 1814, and she was followed by four brothers and four sisters.¹⁰ Large families were common, indeed necessary, before mechanization replaced much of the manual labor required in agriculture and made the farmer's life less strenuous.

In the early 1820's, a number of Westfield citizens became interested in building a canal to connect their town with the Farmington Canal, which ran from its terminus at the state line of Massachusetts at Southwick, south to the port city of New Haven, Connecticut. The canal would be built to Northampton, and it was hoped that it would eventually be extended into Vermont.¹¹ It was thought that the contemplated canal "would revolutionize trade and bring all



OVERLAND TRANSPORTATION IN THE EARLY 19th CENTURY
from the illustration collection of the Springfield City Library.

the towns en route into fresh communication with each other and make New England a wide awake community.”¹² This was before the railroad had been extended to Westfield, and when highways were “little better than cowpaths.” There was an urgent need for a transportation system that could effectively carry merchandise from one inland town to another, and to an ocean port “for wider distribution.” Thomas Sheldon was one of those who saw the apparent advantages of having such a water transportation route.

An enterprise of the magnitude and promise of the proposed canal was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the individual entrepreneur like Sheldon. The story of the Hampshire and Hampden Canal is very much that of Thomas Sheldon, for the rest of his life would be affected, both directly and vicariously, by his intimate association with the canal. It is necessary, therefore, to provide a somewhat detailed account of the history of the canal to properly illustrate the importance of that association.

In January of 1825, Sheldon took an extended trip to Charleston, South Carolina, to visit his brother Henry.¹³ The exact purpose of the trip is not noted in any of the sources, but at least one of the reasons appears to have been for the purpose of raising capital to invest in the canal. An entry in Sheldon’s diary of February 15 indicates a deposit of \$14,000 into their joint account.¹⁴ It is difficult to determine if this or any other money of his brother was actually invested in the canal. Sheldon did invest much of his own, his wife’s, his sister-in-law’s, and his mother-in-law’s money in the canal stock.¹⁵

It is certain that by this time Thomas Sheldon had achieved a position of respect and trust in the town of Westfield, along with financial success and demonstrated responsibility. In August of 1825, he was elected to the first Board of Directors of the new Hampden Bank.¹⁶ The stockholders of the bank were undoubtedly careful to choose directors of proven business experience and ability. Thus, their choice of Thomas Sheldon indicates the professional and personal esteem with which he was regarded in Westfield.

Canal stock was eagerly subscribed for in 1825, and a contract for the construction of the canal was negotiated by September, 1826, and signed the 30th of that month.¹⁷ Thomas Sheldon and Jarvis Hurd, who made the initial survey of the canal route from Northampton to Southwick, contracted to build part of the canal from the termination of the Farmington Canal, from the state line at Connecticut, to the Little River, which was the line between Westfield and Southampton. They were to construct all the locks, aqueducts, abutments, piers, pilings, culverts, bridges and tow paths — they were, in fact, responsible for the entire project. For this undertaking, they were to receive \$138,964.52 and 731 shares of stock.¹⁸ On April 3, 1829, Sheldon and Hurd petitioned the directors of the Canal Company to permit Hurd to withdraw, and Sheldon to assume the entire contract. This request was granted the next day, and Thomas Sheldon became the sole contractor of the canal.¹⁹

Construction of the canal was begun in November, 1826, and proceeded "in favorable situations during most of the winter."²⁰ The detail of the construction of the canal is not germane to this paper, and will not be related. It is sufficient to say that work on the canal progressed steadily, if slowly, but it must be remembered that this was accomplished entirely by human and animal labor.

In May of 1827, Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York came to Westfield to examine the canal.²¹ It was Clinton's effort and successful promotion that had seen the Erie Canal through to completion, and he was honored at a reception and dinner at Westfield as the foremost friend of canal navigation.

Governor Clinton's accomplishments had apparently made a deep impression upon Thomas Sheldon when building the canal had first begun to be discussed. Sheldon's respect and admiration for Clinton is indicated by the fact that in 1826 he named his fourth son after the Governor.²² Clinton was obviously a source of inspiration to Sheldon, and the high esteem with which the Governor was regarded by Sheldon remained firm throughout the years of construction of the canal. At a dinner celebrating the first cruise of Westfield's first canal boat in December, 1829, Sheldon paid tribute to Governor Clinton with a toast to "the memory of DeWitt Clinton — I would that our country could boast a thousand such."²³ Thomas Sheldon was one of the many people who recognized the importance of Clinton's effort and accomplishment by making westward expansion easier via the Erie Canal. Undoubtedly, he hoped the Hampden and Hampshire Canal would be just as successful.

In July, 1829, the first water was let into the canal from a stream north of Westfield,²⁴ and by October of the same year canal boats were coming up the locks to Southwick, "within five miles of the Basin" in Westfield.²⁵ A month later, Westfield launched its first canal boat, the "General Sheldon."²⁶

Sometime during the building of the Westfield Canal, Thomas Sheldon acquired the title of General. Most correspondence to, and records of him after 1829 address him as such. There is no evidence that he ever served in the militia, or that he was appointed to that rank. He had no military experience to warrant an appointment. It is more likely an honorary title given to him for his work on the canal. That he was highly regarded for bringing the dream of a canal to realization is undoubted, for Westfield's first canal boat, the "General Sheldon" was named for him.²⁷ At the dinner given in honor of his first cruise of the "General Sheldon," he received at least two toasts in appreciation of his "enterprise and perseverance" in building the canal.²⁸

For a few years after the opening of the canal, Thomas Sheldon was looked upon as a rich man. He built a new house in the "busy part of the town," and entertained his friends and neighbors in stylish fashion.²⁹ However, the canal led a tenuous existence almost from the time it opened. Dividends that would normally have been paid to the stockholders went to the maintenance of the



WESTFIELD GREEN ABOUT 1838
from the illustration collection of the Westfield Athenium.

canal.³⁰ This, plus rumors of a coming railroad line to Westfield, caused the canal stock to drop in value, "and a panic ensued."³¹ Sheldon was among those who lost nearly everything when the canal failed. He was unable to meet debts because all his capital was invested in the canal. The reverse was doubly disastrous for him, "for all his friends had invested and trusted him to bring them out of it and he could not."³² The confidence and bright promise of the canal's success that Sheldon and others had inspired during its construction vanished overnight. Thomas Sheldon was a ruined man.

With the failure of the canal, Sheldon was faced with the prospect of beginning in business all over again. For reasons unknown, he decided to go South to seek a business opportunity. Perhaps because opportunity seemed brightest there, he decided to try to establish himself again in Houston, Texas.

The first record of Sheldon's presence in Houston is in March, 1837.³³ It is not likely that he arrived much before that time, for he would have been making arrangements to set up a business, and there are no records indicating this. In May, 1837, he purchased 2,214 acres of land in Mina County, Texas, but it is **not** known if this was for investment purposes or for his own use. It is an interesting fact that this transaction took place in New Orleans, Louisiana.³⁴

Thomas Sheldon must have been successful in his search for a new business enterprise. Sometime between the time he arrived in Houston, and the following May, he had formed a partnership with a man named Thomas I. Garley. Sheldon, acting as the purchasing agent, had gone to New Orleans to buy supplies. Letters written from Thomas Garley to Thomas Sheldon in New Orleans during the summer of 1837 indicate that they were opening a dry goods store or something similar.³⁵

A letter written July 8, 1837, indicated that Sheldon was to make a trip to New York to make more extensive purchases. Sheldon returned to Houston for a short time during July, probably with supplies he had purchased in New Orleans. He apparently returned to New Orleans, and intended to travel from there to New York on his purchasing trip.³⁶

Sheldon's family had remained in Westfield while he went South.³⁷ Presumably he intended to move them down to Houston as soon as he felt established. The intentions of Thomas Sheldon will probably never be known, for he was destined to die rather suddenly in 1838.

Sheldon was back in New Orleans in May, 1838, probably on another purchasing trip.³⁸ He returned to Houston that month, and spent some time with Thomas Garley and his family. "He at length expressed a desire to explore the country and after some preparation left town on horseback to visit Metagorda, intending to return in a few days."³⁹ His trip lasted longer than planned, due to his being confined to bed for several days with a fever. Upon his return, Sheldon felt recovered enough to attend to business. However, he had a relapse in early July. He at first refused a doctor's care, always expecting to be better the next day. After two weeks, Sheldon finally allowed Garley to call a doctor, but the sickness had taken its toll. Despite the doctor's efforts, Sheldon succumbed to the disease on July 30, 1838.⁴⁰

Even to the last, Thomas Sheldon expressed "the most unqualified belief that he would recover."⁴¹ This optimistic attitude was obviously an essential part of the man's character, for it had enabled him to weather the task of starting in business again after the dreams of a lifetime had collapsed with the canal. Mrs. Edward Bates Gillett, one of Westfield's leading citizens in the late 1800's, remembered him "as a very kind and pleasant gentlemanly and self-satisfied but strong man...."⁴²

The strength that Thomas Sheldon demonstrated can leave no doubt but that he would have been remembered as one of Westfield's outstanding citizens of all time had the canal been a success. Such was not the case, and he lapsed into obscurity.

Like so many other men during this equalitarian age of expectant capitalism, Sheldon sought to raise his economic and social position through the opportunity it offered the common man. Farmer, land speculator, building contractor, merchandiser — Sheldon filled all these, and probably more, occupational titles during the course of his lifetime.⁴³

NOTES

The author is indebted to Harold Maschin, curator of the historical collection of the Westfield Atheneum, for assistance in locating pertinent sources for this paper.

1. Leland Locke Sheldon, *A Genealogical List of Sheldons in America* (Buffalo, 1960), Vol.III, p.76r.
2. Interview with Mary McClellan, Reference Librarian, Massachusetts State Library, April 29, 1977. See Christopher Collier, ed., *Public Records of the State of Connecticut, May 1802-October 1803* (Hartford, 1967), II, 80.
3. Westfield Tax Records, 1806, in volume dated 1775-1824, Library Safe, Westfield Atheneum.
4. *Ibid.*, 1806-1824.
5. Deed from Edwin Mosley to Thomas Sheldon and John King, Book 53, p.486, Registry of Deeds, New Municipal Building, Springfield.
6. Grantee and Grantor Records, 1800-1845, in Springfield Registry of Deeds.
7. *Ibid.*, Book 49, p.694; U.S. Census, 1820 Population Schedules, Volume II, Westfield, Hampden County, Massachusetts.
8. "Inventory of Notes & a/c of the Estate of Thomas Sheldon," n.d. Western Hampden Historical Society collection, Locker 2, Box S-16, stored in Westfield Atheneum.; "Thomas Sheldon in Account Current with the State of Connecticut," June 1834 to October 1837, located in same locker and box.
9. "Marriage Records of the First Church, Westfield, 1781-1835," Reference Room, Westfield Atheneum.
10. Sheldon, *A Genealogical List*, Vol V. p.114.
11. *Letters of Governor Clinton, and of Colonel L. Baldwin, Chief Engineer of the United States. Improved as Evidence Before the Joint Committee of the Legislature of Massachusetts, on the Petition of Samuel Hinkley and Others, for the Extension of the Hampshire and Hampden Canal* (Boston, 1828), pp.1-8.
12. Mrs. Edward Bates Gillett, "Early Recollections of Mrs. Edward Bates Gillett," bound ms. of childhood recollections, p.46, reference room, Westfield Atheneum.
13. Thomas Sheldon Diary, January 1 to May 27, 1825.
14. *Ibid.*, February 15, 1825.
15. Gillett, "Early Recollections," pp.46-47.
16. Hampden National Bank and Trust Company, *A Chronicle of a Century and a Quarter of Small-Town Banking* (Westfield, 1950), pp.8-9.
17. "Hampshire and Hampden Canal Contract," pp.1-12, Library Safe, Westfield Atheneum.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Charles Rufus Harte, "Connecticut's Canals," report presented at the 54th annual meeting of the Connecticut Society of Engineers, March 16, 1938, p.19. (Copy located in Edwin Smith Historical Museum, Westfield Atheneum.
20. *Hampden Register* (Westfield), December 6, 1826.
21. *Ibid.*, May 30 1827.
22. Sheldon, *A Genealogical List*, Vol. V. p.114.
23. *Hampden Register*, December 9, 1829.
24. *Ibid.*, July 15, 1829.
25. *Ibid.*, October 7, 1829.
26. *Ibid.*, November 11, 1829.
27. *Idem*.
28. *Hampden Register*, December 9, 1829.
29. Gillett, "Early Recollections," p.47. She describes the house as being just east of the "Basin," a place where boats could tie up and unload. Today, the H.B. Smith foundry occupies the site of the old canal basin. Although the exact location of Sheldon's house is not known, this places it in the vicinity of the present-day Main and Mechanic Streets.
30. Harte, "Connecticut's Canals," p.29.
31. Gillett, "Early Recollections," p.4. In fact, the Western Railroad did not reach Westfield until 1841.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Thomas Sheldon, Receipt for jewelry, Houston, March 1837, Western Hampden Historical Society, Locker #2, Box S-16. All future references to Sheldon's papers are from this box.
34. Sheldon, Receipt for land, New Orleans, May 5, 1837.
35. Thomas I. Garley to Sheldon, July 8, 1837.
36. Garley to Sheldon, August 7, 1837.
37. Gillett, "Early Recollections," p.47.
38. Garley to Sheldon, May 7, 1838.
39. Garley to John E. Shepard, August 21, 1838, in locker 2, Box S-16.
40. *Springfield Republican*, September 1, 1838.
41. Harte, "Connecticut's Canals," p.2.
42. Gillett, "Early Recollections," p.47.
43. An interesting analysis of occupational mobility during this period may be found in William H. Goetzmann, "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man," *American Quarterly*, Vol.XV (Fall 1963), pp.402-415.